Political and Social Sciences Department

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SPS No. 98/6

EUI WORKING PAPERS

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

EUI Working Paper SPS No. 98/6

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PETR LOM

BADIA FIESOLANA, SAN DOMENICO (FI)

Printed in Italy in December 1998
European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50016 San Domenico (FI)
Italy

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Denis Diderot's thought is instructive for contemporary students of moral theory for it faces head on the challenge of moral scepticism. Diderot argues that a need for psychological consistency and a demand for the recognition of dignity are resistant to the corrosive force of scepticism. Thus, rather than signaling the Enlightenment's coming to an impasse in its ability to justify an ethics - as he is often interpreted - Diderot instead shows a way out of doubt through a mitigated scepticism, or eclecticism.

According to general accounts of the history of scepticism, scepticism was rediscovered in the sixteenth century Renaissance, grew in importance, from the religious debates between Erasmus and Luther, through the writings of Montaigne and Charron, and culminated with the attempts of Descartes - and the attending criticisms of his efforts - to defeat scepticism once and for all. By the 18th century, scepticism had lost its influence, and with the exception of David Hume, and a few obscure thinkers in France, the optimism of the Age of Reason of the Enlightenment had triumphed.[1] Now, this historical account is changing, and in several recent studies

scepticism is becoming acknowledged as a significant influence on numerous 18th Century French thinkers, ranging from Brissot and Condillac to Rousseau.[2] But Diderot has not yet been included on this list.[3] It is important to examine Diderot's scepticism, not only to further set the historical record straight - and further demonstrate the importance of scepticism in the 18th century - but more importantly, because Diderot's exploration of the limits of scepticism are particularly relevant to contemporary moral reflection.

Ancient vs. Modern Scepticism

For the ancient Pyrrhonists, the goal of scepticism was a negative, therapeutic one. Claiming that belief about good and evil was the prime source of human suffering, the Pyrrhonists used doubt to demonstrate the uncertainty and irreconcilable opposition of all belief. They thought that by freeing themselves from all opinion, they would come to a state of suspended judgement (*epoche*) and then inner tranquility (*ataraxia*). But after the rediscovery of

the writings of Sextus Empiricus in the early sixteenth century, scepticism came to be used for a much wider range of goals. One important current of scepticism followed the Pyrrhonist's negative orientation, in its emphasis on the powerlessness of reason. From Montaigne, to Charron and later to Pascal, scepticism was used to undermine reason: to demonstrate the uncertainty of all opinion, the utter powerlessness of reason, and so point one into the arms of the Church. In the absence of reason, Faith became indispensable, for it was the only trustworthy guide.

At the same time, scepticism was also used to strengthen reason rather than undermine it: doubt was now to be a point of departure rather than a destination. This positive orientation of doubt took a number of forms. It appeared as a "mitigated scepticism" in the thought of Gassendi and Mersenne, and Locke as well - all of whom claimed that while we cannot have absolute certainty about the real nature of things, we can form more modest hypotheses about the world, and while doubting our abilities to find grounds for our knowledge, we can accept and increase that

knowledge itself.[4] It also took another more extreme form in the methodological scepticism of Bacon and above all, in Descartes, a method with which to find not probability, but rather absolute certainty: "to cast aside the loose earth and sand so as to come upon rock or clay."[5]

Diderot was influenced by all of these currents of scepticism. He followed the Cartesian approach to philosophical method, saying in his first published writings, and in his very last words before he died, that "scepticism is the first step towards truth."(II. p. 35).[6] But unlike Descartes, his scepticism reminded him of the limited powers of reason, and, at times, also made him pessimistic about the possibility of moral improvement. For while Diderot believed in scientific and moral progress, writing in the *Prospectus* of the *Encyclopédie* that its goal was to "contribute to the certitude and to the progress of human knowledge" to "fill society with new benefits"(V. p.104), besides this Enlightenment optimistic zeal he also cautioned that "he who would announce to know all shows only that he is ignorant of the limits of the

human mind."(V. p. 92) On other occasions, he pessimistically describes reason as a "feeble light", (IX. p. 88) and more ominously writes that attempts to enlighten mankind are like trying to "introduce a ray of light into an owl's nest: It is useless but to hurt their eyes and excite their cries.(II. p.78) Like Kant, who claimed that man is made out of ever crooked timber, all the while hoping for the possibility of perpetual peace, Diderot affirmed both faith and pessimism about the progress of science.[7]

Yet Diderot's scepticism did not make him entirely pessimistic about the possibility of knowledge, nor its edifying function. His scepticism still had an underlying positive role, one closer to that of the mitigated doubt of a Mersenne or Gassendi than the more destructive doubt of a Charron or Pascal. To be sure, unlike these mitigated sceptics, and unlike Descartes, for whom epistemological doubt was fundamental, Diderot was not interested in epistemological scepticism, for he claimed these questions far too removed from practical life:

> Are there no other truths to look for or to resolve? Let us busy ourselves with something more important; or if we have nothing but such present frivolities, let us sleep and digest instead.(III. p.160)[8]

Rather than to epistemology, the sceptic should dedicate himself to ethics and politics: Diderot claimed that were he forbidden to write about religion and politics, he would have nothing left to say.[9] Nonetheless, Diderot agreed with the mitigated sceptics that doubt does not paralyze; while it is sobering and occasionally may lead one to despair, it still allows for investigation, but this inquiry will be based upon probability not Cartesian certainty.

The *Encyclopédie*, to which Diderot dedicated over twenty five years of his life, reflected this mitigated scepticism. While it followed the geometric ideal of mathematical order in holding that all human knowledge is interconnected, it did not aspire to the precision of geometry. To the contrary, Diderot acknowledged that we are too intellectually feeble to see the truth whole, writing "we will always only be able to understand but a portion of the universe," (V. p. 106) and so the best we can do is to hope for a conjectural or probabilistic knowledge, one that we can arrive at by understanding history and by cataloguing

and showing the interconnections among all the individual sciences.[10]

Scepticism and Eclecticism.

Still, the goal of the *Encyclopédie* was not just to disseminate a body of knowledge. It was also to instill a new way of thinking, to "teach mankind how to doubt" by challenging prejudice, convention and common opinion.(VII. p.221) Diderot describes his ideal of the doubting thinker as one "who tramples underfoot prejudices, tradition, antiquity, universal assent, authority, in a word everything that overawes the mass of minds, who dares to think for himself."(VII. p. 35) Sometimes Diderot calls this free thinker a sceptic, but he also describes him as an eclectic, primarily in order distinguish this thinker from the ancient sceptics, whose method of doubting he did not wholly approve.

According to Diderot, the eclectic is distinguished above all by the fact that he is neither engaged in any kind of system building nor is attached

to any established school of thought. Diderot traces the history of eclecticism to Diogenes Laertius' characterization of a sect of philosophers established by Potamon of Alexandria in the second century after Christ. But the history here is not what is important - Diderot copied it from the historian Brucker, and it includes such diverse thinkers as Bacon, Hobbes, Leibniz and Descartes, who did not self-characterize themselves as eclectics. Rather, what is of interest here is the method of thinking Diderot expounds. Fundamental to Diderot's eclectic is his intellectual independence and probity. The eclectic does not belong to any particular school of thought - for to follow anyone's intellectual lead is a sign of dogmatism, a lack of questioning. The eclectic, instead, is the rigorous thinker who examines all competing philosophical doctrines to see what elements of truth they do contain.[11]

Diderot does acknowledge similarities between his ideal of the free thinker and the ancient Pyrrhonist. He notes that the Greek word *skeptikos* means one who inquires, considers, or deliberates.(IX, p.84) Here

Diderot clearly refers to Sextus' introduction in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, where Sextus tells us that the sceptic is distinguished from all other philosophers precisely by the fact that he seeks to avoid dogmatism, that unlike all other philosophers, the sceptic neither categorically denies nor affirms truth, but rather, "keeps on searching."[12] And so Diderot writes that scepticism is "the touchstone of eclecticism," and that, like the eclectic, the sceptic shares the following principle: "not to be obliged to accept the word of any master."(VII. p. 36)

But Diderot faults the ancient sceptic for using his doubt for solely a destructive purpose. The eclectic free thinker, to the contrary, is to walk side by side with the sceptic, in order to pick up everything that his companion "has not reduced to dust by the severity of his inquiries."(Vol. VII. p. 37) And this is not merely a matter of psychological orientation - whether scepticism is wielded for a destructive or constructive purpose - but more importantly, a question of intellectual probity. For Diderot observes that the Pyrrhonist's destructive

scepticism is fundamentally based upon a dogmatic, unexamined premise. The Pyrrhonists claim that all inquiry culminates with suspension of judgement because there are equally convincing opposing arguments on both sides of any question. But this assumption is dogmatic: it might also be true that the conflict of opinion is only apparent, or superficial, and that instead of making judgement impossible, it may sharpen it. And so, unlike the Pyrrhonist, the eclectic does not automatically suspend judgement, but to the contrary, tries to keep on searching, to see what can be learned from the conflict of opinion.[13] Or as Diderot claims, suspicious about the utter powerlessness of reason, the eclectic does not ultimately suspend judgement, because he is guided by one further principle: "no philosopher is mad enough not to discern some element of the truth."(VII. p. 39)

Diderot is also a perspicacious critic of Pyrrhonism in noting that its method is disingenuous: for he realizes that the Pyrrhonists hold to their principle of *equipollence* - that for every opinion there will always be another, opposing and

irreconcilable one - because they are above all interested in the goal of tranquility rather than a consistently rigorous examination of the truth.[14] The Pyrrhonist does not expend great effort in examining the particulars of conflicting opinion, he does not, as Diderot notes, "render justice to his adversaries."(IX. p. 81) For the Pyrrhonist's tranquility depends on freeing himself from all opinion, the purging of all argument. And this freedom is possible only if the Pyrrhonist is convinced that there will always be an irreconcilable opposite for every belief he examines and no way to arbitrate between them.

Diderot claims that if the ancient sceptic were made honest, then he would be no different from his ideal free thinking eclectic: "make the Pyrrhonist sincere, and you will have a [genuine] sceptic."(II. p. 28) This kind of sceptic would be "a philosopher who doubts everything he believes, and who believes what the legitimate use of his reason and of his senses demonstrates to be true."(II. p.29) But what is the "legitimate use of reason"? How does Diderot's scepticism about the limits of reason affect this

methodological scepticism, the honest sceptic's, or eclectic's inquiry? First, Diderot claims scepticism has a psychological effect. Despite its excesses, Pyrrhonism provides a valuable lesson for the 18th century eclectic, because it promotes intellectual modesty: "upon leaving their school one must consider with a great deal of circumspection the things one had believed to understand."(III. p. 149) Scepticism will tend to make one more cautious, and far less inclined to make hasty and precipitate judgments. Such caution, Diderot hopes, will combat egoism, pride and obstinacy by "tempering in all the impetuosity of the passions."(III. p. 149)

This scepticism affects not only the scope of inquiry, but also its methodology. It makes Diderot aware not just that probability, not certainty is the best we can hope for, but also makes him suspicious of any kind of attempts at philosophical system building, or scientific reductionism, for he realizes the world is so complex, so full of uncertainty that any such narrow systematic or reductive approach will inevitably distort its subject matter. For this reason Diderot

criticized both Rousseau and Hobbes. In the *Encyclopédie* article "Hobbisme", Diderot contrasts the conceptions of human nature found in Hobbes and Rousseau, and while praising the two philosophers, faults them for being extreme - in overly emphasizing but one aspect of human nature and, as a result, building their political theories on skewed foundations. Of Hobbes, Diderot writes "he had the fault of systematic thinkers, that is of generalizing from particular facts and skillfully bending them to fit his hypothesis."(VII. p.232) Diderot cautions that the truth may be somewhere in between the way Hobbes and Rousseau describe it, (and though he is not being entirely fair in his representations of either of these thinkers) he argues that natural man is neither solely good nor entirely wicked: "between their two systems there is another which may convey the truth:...although the human condition is one of perpetual strife, man's goodness and wickedness remain constant, his happiness and suffering circumscribed by limits he cannot breach."(VII. p. 232.)

Similarly, in his dialogue *Jacques le Fatalist,* he shows how the rigid application of science to ethics may further lead to distortion of moral phenomena. The main character of the dialogue, Jacques, preaches a doctrine of scientific determinism: "if it is written up there, it shall occur down here." But though Jacques' theory does not allow for the either freedom or moral responsibility, he still does not act in accordance with this determinism. Instead, he "behaved for the most part just as you and I. He thanked his benefactors so that they would continue to help him. He got angry at wrongdoers."(XXIII. p. 33) And, so at the end of the dialogue, Jacques admits that "we remain human and react as human beings despite our theories."(XXIII. p. 78) Diderot again points to a sceptical suspicion of any kind of explanation that tries to explain all human behavior - particularly ethical behavior on he basis of one principle. Moreover, his scepticism cautions that we should always ask whether a method is adequate to its subject matter - and in the case of science, whether it may even be the proper way to study ethics at all. He writes:

A true man will not have two philosophies, one for the study and another for society. He will never establish principles that he will be forced to forget in practice. (VIII. p.160)

Thus Diderot helps us think about what kinds of justifications and what kind of certainty we might expect from ethics. Contemporary observers across the ideological spectrum - whether it is Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor or Richard Rorty - all complain that reductive mechanical interpretations of nature, and the appropriation of such paradigms to ethics, impoverish moral discourse.[15] Diderot - far closer to the Cartesian revolution in science than we are - reminds us that scepticism should make our aims in ethics more modest ones - that we should be suspicious of either systematic or reductive ethical explanations, and that we should not look for mathematical certainty in ethical matters.

What, then, does scepticism teach Diderot about ethics? What will Diderot's constructive sceptic - or eclectic, have left to pick up after his questioning? Diderot spent a lifetime meditating on this question, for he was acutely aware of the challenge scepticism posed to morality: "but if good and evil are nothing in of themselves, there will be neither rules nor mores

nor life at all."(III. p. 149) And because Diderot and the other *philosophes* wanted to free man from the intellectual oppression of the Church, it was especially important that they respond to these sceptical doubts. For while morality had previously been underwritten by religious authority, now it was to stand alone, grounded in human reason. And many in the Church claimed that reason was impotent to such a task, that a secular philosophy would destroy morality and undermine society.[16] They asked, as Thomas Carlyle later wrote in a polemical essay attacking Diderot: "since there is nothing sacred in the universe, whence this sacredness of what you call virtue?"[17] Moreover, they held that eventually scepticism would point one back to the moral security of the Church, agreeing with Pascal that "Pyrrhonism is the handmaid of religion."[18][19] And so, the *philosophes* were faced with the task of disproving this charge, or as Diderot wrote in a famous letter to Voltaire, "it is not enough to know more than they [those of the Church] do: it is necessary to show them that we are better and that philosophy makes more good men than sufficient or

efficacious grace."[20] To what extent Diderot succeeded we can gauge by considering his greatest work, *Rameau's Nephew*.

Rameau's Nephew

> *Nothing has ever appeared to me more spiritual and more daring, more immorally moral.*
> *-Goethe*

Rameau's Nephew is the work which ought to rightfully secure Diderot a preeminent place in the history of philosophy. The dialogue has a curious history, for Diderot never published it in his lifetime, nor is there any mention of it in his voluminous correspondence. It was first published in Germany, in a translation by Goethe who was sent the discovered manuscript by Schiller.[21] Immediately recognizing its merit, Schiller esteemed Diderot "an inextinguishable flame", while Goethe deemed *Rameau* a masterpiece that "explodes upon the scene of French literature", and immediately set to work upon its translation.[22] Despite their praise, it was Hegel who was perhaps the first to appreciate the dialogue's

historical and philosophical significance. For in his *Phenomenology*, in several lengthy references to the dialogue, Hegel enshrines *Rameau* as a work of exceptional importance, as a paradigm of the modern spiritual and cultural situation.[23] In it, Hegel saw the exact portrait of his pronouncements on the self-alienation of Spirit, the disintegration of consciousness, and the dialectic between master and slave in a decaying culture from which authentic revolutionary conscience would arise.[24]

Although we need not accept Hegel's superimposing a historical dialectic onto his reading of the dialogue, we can take Hegel's question as our point of departure:

> If all prejudice and superstition have been banished, the question arises, *What next? What is the truth Enlightenment has propagated in their stead?*(*Phenomenology*, 557)

Or in Diderot's words, what is the eclectic left with after the sceptic has completed his questioning?

Rameau's Nephew is a dialogue between two characters. One is a philosopher, the other, Rameau, nephew of the famous French composer, a professional parasite, a court buffoon who lives by sponging off the

rich. The philosopher tries to convince his interlocutor, Rameau, of the errors of his ways, claiming that the life of virtue is the only happy life. But Rameau is not easily convinced. He objects to the philosopher that this equation is an implausible one: "I can see countless good people who are not happy, and countless happy ones who are not good."(XII. p.118) And he challenges not merely the efficacy of virtue, but also the philosopher's definitions of virtue and happiness. He is sceptical about the definition of virtue, saying "if we came to a clear understanding, it might turn out that what you call vice I call virtue and what I call vice you call virtue."(XII. p. 139) And he is equally sceptical about the philosopher's conception of happiness, arguing instead, that there are many rival incommensurable conceptions of the ordering of life:

> You think that happiness is the same for all. What a strange illusion! Your own brand presupposes a certain romantic turn of mind that we don't all possess...You dignify this oddity with the name of virtue and you call it philosophy. But are virtue and philosophy made for everybody? (XII. p.114)

Rameau, in fact, is sceptical about a coherent idea of morality at all, saying that "in a matter a variable as mores there is no such thing as the

absolutely, essentially, universally true or false."(XII. p.139)

Rameau is not merely sceptical, he is also cynical. He says that what really counts in the world is not ethics but rather merely appearance. Hypocrisy rules the world: what is essential is to *seem* ethical, not to actually be virtuous: "evil only upsets people now and then, but the visible signs of evil hurt them from morning till night."(XII. p.120) Moreover, morality in fact, is merely window-dressing, a disguise for power. Rameau writes, "from pole to pole all I see are tyrants and slaves."(XII. p.114)

And so, Rameau lives as an unscrupulous hedonist, following his motto "never false as long as it is in my interest to be true; never true if I see the slightest use of being false" and claims that the only goal in life is "to drink good wine, gorge oneself on fine food, lie upon pretty women, lie in a nice soft bed, except for that, all is vanity."(XII. p.114) But his hedonism and his ethical nihilism are the result of his doubts: in a world of ethical chaos, the only

certainties that Rameau seems able to find are power and pleasure.

Rameau's outbursts appear to leave the philosopher helpless. Or, as Hegel interprets the dialogue, the philosopher is reduced to mere chatter. What is worse, the philosopher admits that he has to respect Rameau for his honesty. At least Rameau is no hypocrite and desires to act consistently, acnowledging his ruthlessness. From this point Hegel illustrates his analysis of disintegrating consciousness, of how the noble-minded consciousness decays through flattery and its eventual pursuit of wealth to become indistinguishable from base consciousness. But though it may accurately describe the decay of the *ancien regime* in 18th century France, we need not invoke Hegel's dialectical analysis to understand why the philosopher is unable to respond to Rameau.

Instead, the answer lies in the momentous shifts in the conceptions of nature in the 18th century. For the abandonment of religious justifications of morality combined with the effects of the scientific revolution's rejection of Aristotelian teleology made

attempts to justify what human beings *ought* to do deeply problematic.[25] One can trace this gradual realization in Diderot's thoughts from his early article "Droit Naturel" in the first volume of the *Encyclopédie*, to the final outbursts of Rameau.[26] In his article *Droit Naturel*, while asserting that the question of natural right is "of all our moral concepts one of the most important", Diderot also finds it to be "one of the most difficult to specify", and in fact is unable to come up with a satisfactory answer precisely because of his unsettling doubts about the stability of nature, and so its capacity to underwrite any normative ethical standard.(VII. p. 25) Parallel to Rousseau's historicization of nature, and the consequent undercutting of nature as an ethical standard in his thought, Diderot finds no ground in nature to stand as the foundation for natural right. Instead, he attempts to defend natural right as merely the expression of a global general will, with the result that, like in Rousseau's thought, natural right collapses into consideration of utility.[27]

Diderot further attempts to defend nature as an ethical standard through his explorations of science, even claiming it impossible to "establish a morality without being an anatomist, naturalist, physiologist and physician."(XI. p. 514) For Diderot considered that perhaps science could come up with an answer to the question what is the nature of man. But here again he comes upon the dilemma of making binding normative arguments out of "natural" standards in the absence of any agreed upon final causes in nature. In *D'Alembert's Dream*, Diderot admits that without teleology, science is left only with description: "man is merely a common phenomenon while a monster is only a rare phenomenon, but both are equally natural."(XVII. p.202)

Exasperated by the difficulties raised by science for morality, Diderot once wrote: "I rage at being entangled in a devil of a philosophy that my mind can't help approving and my heart belying." And because of this comment, *Rameau's Nephew* is sometimes interpreted as a full blown expression of nihilism, the final logical working out of the apparent contradiction in Diderot's mind, with the philosopher vainly arguing for

the case of virtue, while Rameau destructively appeals to the lessons of science as the apology for his complete denials of all ethical standards.[28] It is claimed that alone of the 18th century philosophes, Diderot had the perspicuity to realize that the Enlightenment project of rationally justifying morality had ground to a halt, that he saw that the mechanization of nature had left the philosophes with a "quixotic" task in their efforts to construct an ethics.[29] And because Diderot did not publish *Rameau's Nephew*, it is inferred that he did so for strictly prudential reasons, that he must have been aware the dialogue would be an apology for evil.[30] But these pronouncements are unduly dark - and do not give sufficient weight to Diderot's avowal in the *Encyclopédie*, that the constructive sceptic, or in his terminology, the eclectic's, chief task is to see what scepticism leaves uncorroded.

The Limits of Doubt

Rameau boasts that he lives on the basis of the precept "never false as long as it is in my interest

to be true; never true if I see the slightest use of being false." But he fails at his own game: he is thrown out of the house where he serves as resident jester. Diderot's lesson is not merely that this sort of Machiavellian nihilism is not for the weak nor foolish. Certainly, there are elements of this sort of moralizing in Diderot's writings - *Jacques the Fatalist* is full of tales of people trying to live by Rameau's tenets and failing miserably. A man who tries to steal a baker's wife by denouncing her husband with a *lettre de cachet* ends up himself caught out. Another intends to run off with his maid, and so betrays his wife - signing over all his positions to his lover. His lover then swindles him, defrauds him of all his property, and leaves him in debtor's jail. But Diderot does not merely teach that crime does not pay; he also points to the limits of scepticism. For despite his denials of all moral distinctions, that all is hypocrisy and a masquerading of power, Rameau is less able to escape the realm of ethics than he would have us believe.

The dialogue begins with an epigram from Horace: "Born under the malign influence of all the Vertumnes." The Vertumnes were gods of the changing of the seasons. In Horace the description refers to an unstable, ever changing Roman Senator.[31] And Diderot uses the epigram to refer to the chaotic, unstable nature of Rameau as well, whom he introduces as "a mixture of noble and base, of good sense and madness", one who sees the moral realm as completely chaotic, in whose mind "the notion of honesty and dishonesty are strangely jumbled together."(XII p. 70) Rameau says "I know nothing", and "devil take me if I know who I really am."(XII. p. 132, 139) He doubts the possibility of any rational morality, and not merely doubts, but holds to a dogmatic nihilistic denial of all moral distinctions. And so he lives as the thorough pantomime, taking on whatever role serves his interest: "one has to be whatever self-interest decrees; good or bad, wise or foolish; decent or ridiculous; honest or vicious."(XII. p.139)

But in spite of this nihilistic boasting, Rameau still wants to justify his actions. Despite Horace's

epigram about perpetual change, complete ethical chaos, this chaos is less than complete, for Rameau still wants to demonstrate that he acts on the basis of an underlying principle, even though this principle sanctions his acting as a perpetual chameleon: false or true according to his self-interest. Though Rameau purports to be ever changing, there is still method in his seeming madness. And though the principle is a base one: false or true according to circumstance, it is important to Rameau that the philosopher recognize him for his consistency. And he does; the philosopher admires Rameau, for what Goethe described as his "immoral moralism": for Rameau is no hypocrite, he lives according to the principles he espouses. In this way his depravity becomes "profound."(XII p. 176)

But this is not the only limit to Rameau's ostensible affirmation of moral chaos. Though he says he holds the standard, "never false when it serve me to be true, never true when it serves me to be false," his perfidy leads him to several difficulties. First of all, Rameau thinks his

Machiavellianism makes him free, but, in fact, it actually enslaves him. For his changing to fit whatever circumstances suit him, adopting the cloak of virtue and vice as needed, is merely a "beggar's pantomime."(XII. p. 189) And this is where the philosopher is able to reply to Rameau. For unlike Rameau, and everyone who takes on a role, the philosopher does not play this pantomime; he is the only one who is truly free. But more importantly, Rameau is also not able to live down to his own standard. He is thrown out of the house where he is resident buffoon and parasite because he refuses to abase himself in front of his masters and plead for their forgiveness. The philosopher asks him matter of factly, why he does not go and grovel in front of his former employers, apologize for his transgressions, and seek reinstatement to his position. Rameau responds that human dignity is resistant to all attempts at enslavement, that even a worm turns when trodden upon, that his nature prevented him from returning: "there must be a certain dignity connected

with man's nature and which nothing can stifle. A mere nothing will arouse it."(XII. p. 120)

Should we take Rameau's words at face value here? Rameau is also the buffoon who seems not to take any principle seriously at all, who delights in provoking the philosopher and taunting him at every turn. And so, alongside this demand for freedom, he also tells the philosopher that he has nothing against abasement, provided that it would be abasement on his own terms. But here, despite his mockery, Rameau is not willing to give up this claim for freedom, for abasement with preconditions is not really abasement at all. Though Rameau may mock the idea of human dignity, he cannot rid himself from it - his resistance, after all, is the reason why he is thrown out by his masters.

Diderot wrote that he "did not dare to pick up a pen and write the first line" of a systematic ethical treatise, for he did not think he could establish what the philosopher in Rameau's Nephew attempts: the equation of happiness with virtue.[32] But while Diderot does not achieve this goal in *Rameau,*

(though he points to the opposite - for Rameau's nihilism does not make him happy, he ends up as quite a pathetic character, having lost not only his employment, but also his wife as well) his scepticism at least points to the limits of doubt. For there are two separate elements that Rameau's doubts do not corrode: his desire to justify his actions, to act consistently according to a guiding principle, and his demand for human dignity. And together, these principles can form the basis for an ethics.

Kant, of course, claimed that the desire to act consistently according to a guiding principle is at the foundation of morality: the fundamental rule act so that the maxim of your action can be willed to become a general law, is in essence a formulation of the injunction do not contradict yourself. We also know that this formulation has been historically criticized - most famously by Hegel, as an empty one, that merely to demand consistency of action need not itself serve as an argument justifying ethical behavior. Or as Rameau attempts to argue, consistency is no guarantee of virtue, for a scoundrel may wish to act on

thoroughly consistent premises. But Rameau's other principle - his demand for human dignity - circumscribes the realm of what is permitted if he is to remain true to this need for internal consistency. For if Rameau wants to justify his actions - to act in a coherent manner, and if he wants his own dignity to be recognized, than he would have no choice but to recognize the dignity of others. Out of the dialogue which Hegel deemed to be the example of disintegrating consciousness, instead, we find the latent seeds of Hegel's conception of recognition as the basis of ethics.

Of course, this does not mean that Rameau *does* recognize, or care about the dignity of others in the dialogue. He is obviously a scoundrel. But Diderot's lesson is that there are contradictions to his own perfidy. Though Rameau's doubts seem to free him from all moral judgement, he himself provides the ethical standards with which to censure his own treachery. In this way, we can understand that *Rameau's Nephew* is not the *huis clos* that some interpreters make it out to be, but that rather it indicates way out of doubt, by

pointing to the limits of moral scepticism, demonstrating that morality is more difficult to escape than the sceptic may think.

But *Rameau's Nephew* also help us better understand the nature of scepticism in other ways. Rameau easily falls from a sceptical doubt about the possibility of justifying moral beliefs to a dogmatic denial of this possibility itself: his doubt almost immediately becomes dogmatic. First he says that he is sceptical, or rather uncertain about the nature of moral belief, but then he goes beyond this doubt to a dogmatic affirmation that all that underlies moral belief is merely power. This shift not only points to the inescapability of moral judgement and moral belief, a necessity from which scepticism does not free - a lesson which critics of scepticism have pointed out for centuries, objecting that total scepticism is not possible - but it also indicates the slipperiness and instability of scepticism itself. Though complete scepticism or agnosticism on moral questions may not be possible, even an incomplete scepticism is very difficult to maintain. For an intrinsic part of

scepticism, as the doubt about the possibility of justifying moral and political belief, is an obligation to continually keep questioning all beliefs that we encounter. And that is hard work. Consequently, we should not be surprised to see that scepticism may easily decay into dogmatism, that doubt may be replaced by unquestioning belief. And so, *Rameau's* lesson is not only that morality is inescapable, but also that he who wishes to adopt scepticism should understand that it is a very difficult task.

Finally, in the spirit of Diderot's avowal that the true sceptic would be one who calls into question *all* belief, we still need to ask one question. How is it possible for Diderot to affirm the principles of consistency and the principle of human dignity, and at the same time claim to be a sceptic - the true or honest sceptic at all? Does not this make his scepticism, rather than mitigated, merely inconsistent? We might be correct in pointing to inconsistencies in Diderot's scepticism, but we will not find them here. Every sceptic is subject to inconsistencies, for it is not possible to remain in a complete state of doubt

upon all questions. And Diderot is no exception. When he claims that the true sceptic should not submit his judgement to anyone, it is clear that Diderot is not merely advocating a neutral method of questioning, but that he believes - without question - in the principle of freedom, a freedom that is not merely intellectual but political as well. And this is clear from Diderot's *Encylopédie* article "Autorité", which incited enough official disapprobation to put the whole project at risk, where Diderot argues that political authority is derived from the consent of the people themselves, rather than from nature or force. But here on the question of human dignity, Diderot is not inconsistent with his scepticism. Diderot once wrote "one may demand of me that I look for the truth, but not that I find it."(II. p.28) And in *Rameau's Nephew* Diderot follows this tenet. He does not find a non-sceptical rational justification of ethics: he does not establish on what grounds Rameau is able to appeal to human dignity. But that is not his purpose - as he himself cautioned, he was not able to develop a systematic ethics where he

might provide such an answer. In *Rameau's Nephew*, Diderot instead only demonstrates that while we may be full of doubt about how human dignity may be established, it is far more difficult to rid ourselves of this principle then we might think. And in our postmodern times, where there is still no consensus on moral justification, that is a very valuable service indeed.

Notes:

[1] See the various studies of Richard Popkin: *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley, 1979); *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* (San Diego: Austin Hill, 1980) esp. pp.11-38; "Scepticism and the Enlightenment" *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No.3, pp.279-298; "Scepticism and Modernity" in *The Rise of Modern Philosophy* ed. Tom Sorell (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1993); and "Scepticism in the Prussian Academy" in *Hume Studies* Vol. XXIII, No. 1, April 1997, p. 153-191.

[2] See the collection of essays in Richard Popkin ed., *Scepticism in the Enlightenment* (Kluwer, 1997); and *The Skeptical Tradition Around 1800* (Kluwer, 1998).

[3] There are some exceptions to this earlier neglect of Enlightenment scepticism, particularly in the works of Judith Shklar (see esp. *Political Thought & Political Thinkers* (University of Chicago, 1998)) and Peter France *Diderot* (Oxford University Press, 1983), both of whom briefly point to Diderot's scepticism, but do not treat it in systematic fashion.

[4] See Richard Popkin, (1979) pp. 129-150.

[5] *Discourse on Method*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984.) p. 125.

[6] References to Diderot are from the complete works edition edited by H. Dieckmann and J. Varloot (Paris: Hermann, 1975-) and are indicated first by volume number and then page number. All translations are my own.

[7] This pessimism was not restricted to Diderot alone. For example, d'Alembert expresses similar thoughts in his preliminary discourse to the first volume of the *Encyclopédie*. Hoping the Enlightenment would improve mankind's lot, he pleaded: "May the Encyclopédie become a sanctuary where men's knowledge may be protected from revolutions and from time."(I. p.xxxvii. Facsimile of first edition 1751-1780. (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1988) Yet beside such faith in the future, in other writings he darkly writes that "the supreme Intelligence has drawn a veil before our feeble vision which we try in vain to remove" and elsewhere proclaims that "barbarism lasts for centuries and seems to be our natural element, while reason and good taste are but passing phenomena." (As quoted in Henry Vyverberg, *Historical Pessimism in the French Enlightenment* (Harvard, 1958)).

[8] Because of this indifference to epistemology, some interpreters incorrectly assume that Diderot was neither interested nor influenced by scepticism at all. See Popkin (1997).

[9] Vol.XII, p.118 notes.

[10] For more on this interpretation of the *Encyclopédie*, see Judith Shklar, "Jean D'Alembert and the Rehabilitation of History," in *Political Thought & Political Thinkers*, pp. 294-316.

[11] Because of the influence of Ernest Zeller's account of eclecticism one hundred years ago, eclecticism has often been understood as the uncritical combining of heterogeneous elements. But this interpretation is now being challenged, and it is contended that eclecticism ought to have the meaning Diderot gives it here - as intellectual independence and probity. See Ulrich Schneider, "Eclecticism Rediscovered" in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Spring 1998. who insists that in the nineteenth century England and France, eclecticism was a name for an "intellectual strategy" of precisely the intellectual independence Diderot describes. See also *The Question of "eclecticism": Studies in Later Greek Philosophy*, ed. J. Dillon and A.A. Long (Berkeley, 1988).

[12] *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. J.Annas and J. Barnes (Cambridge University Press, 1994), I.1.

[13] On this as the fundamental distinction between Pyrrhonism and Eclecticism, see J. Brunschwig, "Sextus Empiricus on the *criterion*: The Sceptic as Conceptual Legatee", in *Papers in Hellenistic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1994).

[14] For other observations about the dogmatic and disingenuous elements within Pyrrhonism see Brochard *Les Sceptiques Grecs* (Paris, 1932); M. Nussbaum *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton, 1994); D. Sedley "The Motivation of Greek Scepticism" in *The Skeptical Tradition* ed. M. Burnyeat (Berkeley, 1983); D. Olasa, "Scepticism, Old and New" in R. Popkin (1997).

[15] Conservatives such as Leo Strauss note that a desire for scientific exactness leads to absurd demands to prove the obvious, where we question what is obvious to children. Hannah Arendt provides us with a similar conclusion - because of the Cartesian inspired demand for mathematical certainty, she argues that we live in world where common sense is increasingly splintered, and the faculty of judgment more and more impoverished. The same lesson is repeated in more recent writings. Charles Taylor similarly argues that the scientific naturalist perspective has led to a widespread popular ethical

subjectivism as a reaction to the inappropriate demands of scientific certainty from ethics. And finally, Richard Rorty also writes that the study of ethics should turn to interpretative rather than scientific methods. See Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 23. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago, 1958), p. 280-88. Charles Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason" in *WIDER Working Papers* (World Institute for Development Economics Research), August 1989. Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers* Vol. 3 (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[16] For example see Richard Popkin, "Scepticism and the Enlightenment" *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No.3, pp.279-298, on the role of fideism in the 18th Century.

[17] Thomas Carlyle, "Diderot" in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*. Vol. 3, p. 238 (New York: AMS Press, 1974).

[18] *Pensées*, ed. Francis Kaplan, (Paris: CERF, 1982.) No. 109, p.137.

[19] As one of the critic of the *Encyclopédie* wrote when the first volume appeared, "a true eclectic, an eclectic who would legitimately use his own reason, would soon enough become a perfect Christian." As quoted in Jacques Proust, *Diderot et l'Encylopédie* (Paris: Slatkin, 1982), p. 257.

[20] D. to V. Sept. 29, 1762. *Correspondance*, ed. G. Roth and J. Varloot. (Paris, 1955-70). VIII. p. 123.

[21] For a description of the mysterious trail which eventually led to the work's discovery and publication see Leonard Tancock's introduction in his translation of the work (London: Penguin, 1966), as well as the preface in the critical edition edited by Jean Fabre (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1950).

[22] As quoted in the exhaustive study of Diderot's reception in Germany by Roland Mortier, *Diderot en Allemagne* (Paris: Slatkine, 1966) pp 263-269.

[23] There is a vast literature on Hegel's treatment of *Rameau*. For a useful summary of the most common interpretations see James Schmidt, "The Fool's Truth: Diderot, Goethe and Hegel," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 59, No. 1. January 1998.

[24] Hegel is not the only one to find a dialectic at work in *Rameau*. In his *AntiDuhring*, Engels describes *le Neveu de Rameau* as a "masterpiece of dialectic." See Marie-Jeanne Konigsen,

"Hegel, Adam Smith et Diderot" p.66 in *Hegel et le Siècle des Lumières*, ed. by Jacques d'Hondt (Paris: PUF, 1974).

[25] One can find treatments of this issue by diverse thinkers as Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (University of Chicago Press, 1953) p.8, Alastair Macintyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame, 1981), p.54, and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

[26] On the evolution of Diderot's thoughts on nature, particularly his progressive realization of the difficulties of using nature as an ethical standard, see Lester Crocker *An Age of Crisis.* (John Hopkins Press, 1959) and *Nature and Culture: Ethical Thought in the French Enlightenment* (John Hopkins Press, 1963). Also Peter France, *Diderot* (Oxford University Press, 1983).

[27] On the difference between Diderot's conception of the general will and that of Rousseau, see A. Adam "Rousseau et Diderot" in *Revue des Sciences Humaines* (Jan-March 1949) pp.30-32. And on Diderot's conception of natural right see Proust, "La Contribution de Diderot: l'Encyclopédie et les Theories du Droit Naturel", in *Annales Historiques de la Revolution Francaise*. No. 173. July-Sept. 1963.

[28] e.g. see Carl Becker, "The Dilemma of Diderot" in *Philosophical Review*, 24, 1915, pp.54-71.

[29] For example, see the analysis of Diderot in Alasdair Macintyre (1981) as well as Mark Hulliung *The Autocritique of the Enlightenment* (Harvard Unversity Press, 1994) who are the few contemporary scholars of political theory to recognize the significance of *Rameau*.

[30] Of course, it is equally plausible to note that *Rameau* was not the only one of Diderot's writings not published during his lifetime, and that one possible reason why he did not publish many of his writings was because of his earlier imprisonment at Vincennes. Diderot was released upon order that he promise to do nothing in the future that might be contrary in the slightest respect to religion and good morals. See Arthur Wilson, *Diderot* (Oxford, 1972), p.112.

[31] On further interpretations of the significance of this epigram, and more generally, of Horace for *Rameau's Nephew*, see Michael Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero* (Princeton, 1995); Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* . trans. by W. Trask, (Pantheon, 1953, NY); and Donal O'Gorman, *Diderot the Satirist* (University of Toronto, 1972).

[32] *Correspondance*. Vol. IX, p. 20.

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